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ABSTRACT

In this study comparing peer group conversation with conversation in other settings, five college freshmen were observed and taped in the 12th week of the semester during a group discussion about their own writing. Four types of conversational moves were tallied: structural comments, solicitations, responses, and reactions. Comparison of these totals with those in teaching, tutoring, and non-teaching settings revealed that peer group conversation most closely resembles non-teaching conversation. Non-teaching or natural conversation has been described as a series of reactions between speakers. Teaching conversation consists of questions from the teacher, student responses, and then teacher reactions. Tutoring settings fall in the middle, with characteristics of both natural and teaching conversation. All of these settings may be differentiated also in relation to negotiations for control. Non-teaching settings involve little negotiation since participants seem to assume equal status. In traditional teacher settings, the teacher is clearly in control. Questions remaining for future studies are: (1) whether there is a cause and effect relationship between a student's writing ability and that student's participation in the peer group; (2) whether the socialization of women makes them more likely than men to assume active roles in peer groups; and (3) whether peer group conversation's likeness to natural conversation makes it more beneficial to students than other kinds of conversation. (Four tables are included, and two pages of references are attached.) (MHC)

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The Dimensions of Talk in Peer Groups: Negotiating Control in Writing Group Conversation

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The Dimensions of Talk in Peer Groups:

Negotiating Control in Writing Group Conversation

Collaborative groups, championed by many (see, for example, Bruffee (1984) and Nystrand (1986)), have become commonplace in writing courses. The benefits of these groups have been well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Trimbur (1985) for an overview of the field).

This study examined what actually occurred during one peer group's conversation. I hoped it would begin to answer three questions: What is the nature of talk in college peer groups? How does peer-group talk compare to tutor-writer talk? How does peer-group talk compare to teacher-student talk?

METHOD AND DESIGN

Participants

The study examined the oral interaction that occurred between five first-year writers enrolled in my English composition course at East Central Oklahoma University. The session took place during the twelfth week of the semester; all students were well acquainted with group activities.

The five students represent a cross-section of the students at ECU. Three were women, two men. One was from the city and had lived in other areas of the country, two were from nearby towns with medium-to-large high schools, and two had grown up in rural Oklahoma areas with very small high schools. One woman was married and was returning to school after an eight year absence. The students' final course grades ranged from A to D. One

student had not decided on a major and four had: business, chemistry, accounting, and law enforcement.

All particpants were accustomed to working in groups and with sharing their writing. The make-up of this particular group, however, was unusual; the members normally took part in three different groups and were thrown together for the first time during this session.

Session Format

From the beginning of the semester, the students had been asked to read their papers aloud to group members and then to particpate in a variety of conversations about the paper. Early in the semester the conversations had followed rigid guidelines describing who talked, about what, and when. After a few sessions, other formats were offered. One required the completion of sentences detailing subjective responses to the paper. One, focusing on high-order-concerns, was adapted from Reigstad and McAndrew (1984, p. 22). Toward the end of the semester, however, the particpants were asked only to designate three strengths, three weaknesses, and three questions they had about each paper.

Students selected their own writing topics, but were asked to designate an audience and a purpose for each piece. Generally, this information came out during introductory information the authors gave before reading. There was no required order nor focus to the conversation.

Data Collection

The session was audio taped with the knowledge and permission of the participants. Tape quality was excellent. The writers were aware of the equipment and twice made references to it during the conversation, both times when a writer was offering self-incriminating testimony. The participants reported that the taping did not affect their participation.

The students regularly kept dialogue journals. I encouraged them to use the journals to record their reactions both to the group and to the audio taping. Three members did.

Coding System

For coding the types of converation within the session, I used a system which differentiatied between structuring (STR) comments which shaped the form of the conversation; solicitations (SOL) for specific information or responses; responses (RES) to those solicitations; and reactions (REA) to structuring, responding, or other reacting comments. The system was originally designed for comparing the conversation which took place in ESL classrooms with that which took place in non-teaching situations (Fanselow, 1977), and was later modified for studying tutor/writer conversation in a writing center (Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace, in press) and for studying teacher/student conferencing language (Wallace, 1988).

CODING RESULTS

The number of conversation moves for each speaker reflect the wide differences in student involvement.

	STR	SOL	RES	REA	TOTAL
Lisa	13	15	3	29	60
Shelly	4	6	11	37	58
Anna	8	4	8	36	56
Carl	0	2	4	17	23
David	1	0	3	5	9
Total	26	27	29	124	206

Table 1: Number of move types by each speaker.

The disparity between the numbers requires a few comments. First, Lisa and David were regularly in the same group, so it isn't necessarily familiarity which encourages dialgoue inside the group. Second, the arrangement as shown, by decreasing number of total comments, is also the arrangement by decreasing grade for the course.

The number of structure moves might be misleading. Lisa served as group recorder, writing down the comments the group agreed upon. Ten of her 13 structure moves were made within this role as she kept the group on task. When Lisa read her paper, Anna became the group recorder and 5 of her 8 structure moves were to keep the group on task. The 15 group-leader structure moves consisted of comments such as "We only have two weaknesses for this paper." The other 11 structure remarks primarily dictated order of reading ("You go next.")

The higher number of solicitations by Lisa and responses by Shelly are the result of a dialogue between the two during discussion of Lisa's paper. Lisa kept asking questions about her own paper to draw out conversation on areas that bothered her. Her questioning also accounts for the fact that there were more responses than questions:

Lisa: Was there something you didn't understand?

Carl: It was clear to me.

Shelly: There was no question about it being clear.

Lisa: Does it end too abruptly?

Shelly: No, the ending is fine.

Anna: We've got ten million strengths here.

With the exception of Lisa, whose numbers may be skewed by her recorder role, all participants made more reactions than all other move types combined. Reactions account for 60% of the total moves during the session.

Paper	Owner	STR	SOL	RES	REA
1	Carl	11%	16%	14%	59%
2	Shelly	20%	11%	14%	54%
3	Lisa	10%	8%	15%	67%
4	David	7%	11%	11%	70%
5	Anna	9%	17%	17%	57%
All Papers		12%	13%	15%	60%

Table 2: percentage of move types for each paper and overall

Table 2 shows the percentage of move types for each paper discussed. The percentages remain remarkably consistent for each

of the papers reviewed. The visible discrepancies can be explained by examing the conversation.

The high number of structuring moves on paper two, Shelly's paper, for example, is because of the group's inability to stay on-task. Lisa would ask for strong points, and the group would find weaknesses or ask questions. Rather than let the conversation establish its own direction, Lisa felt compelled to work down the list in a prescribed manner.

Paper 3, Lisa's paper, produced the fewest solicitations. Her paper, a fictional account of a rape, was the only paper which produced no questions from the reviewers. On the other papers, most questions were asked by the responders; on Lisa's paper, all the questions were asked by the writer.

paper owner	total comments	comments by writer	% of writer comments	% of comments on own paper
1 Carl	44	8	18%	35%
2 Shelly	41	11	27%	19%
3 Lisa	48	15	31%	25%
4 David	27	6	22%	67%
5 Anna	46	17	37%	30%
All Papers	206	57	28%	28%

Table 3: comments made by the writer

The writers assumed active roles in the discussion of their own papers, as indicated in the third column of Table 3. With the exception of David's paper, the percentage of writer comments increased on each subsequent paper. David spoke very little, making 67 percent of all his comments on his own paper, and his composition consisted of two brief paragraphs about deer hunting.

Carl made the lowest percentage of writer comments. He was trying to turn a successful psychology class paper into a composition for a more general readership. Since Carl considered his paper complete except for audience reorientation, he said little as his classmates recommended ways for him to change the writing's focus.

Anna, author of paper five, made the highest percentage of writer comments. Her paper, a lengthy narrative about a family tragedy, elicited much empathetic response from her peers. Many of her comments were in response to solicitations for more information about the event.

Column four indicates the percentage of a student's comments which were made on her own paper. A writer who comments equally on her own paper and on other papers, as did Shelley, might be seen as being equally reader and writer oriented. On the other hand, David, the weakest writer, made the highest percentage of self-comments, and might be seen as being solely writer centered.

Overall, speakers were interrupted only five times (2%). In all cases, the interrupter finished a sentence the previous speaker had begun.

Comparison of Codings

The major purpose of this study was to compare the conversation moves made within one peer group with the conversation moves made in other settings. Table six depicts such a comparison.

	STR	SOL	RES	REA
teaching settings	7%	35%	35%	25%
non-teaching settings	11%	11%	12%	66%
tutoring settings	6%	21%	21%	52%
conferencing (a)	4%	11%	8%	78%
conferencing (b)	3%	19%	18%	49%
peer group setting	13%	13%	14%	60%

Table 6: Percentage of each conversational move in teaching and non-teaching (figures are from Fanselow (1978)), tutoring (figures from Davis et al (in press)), and conferencing (figures from Wallace (1988)).

In his study, Fanselow described conversation in natural, non-teaching settings as being primarily a series of reactions between speakers. Speakers would alternate, reacting in turn to the previous statements, asking few questions.

In teaching settings, however, Fanselow found a far different pattern. Teachers tended to ask questions, to which students would respond. Then the teacher would react to the student's response.

Tutoring settings have been described to exist in some middle ground between teaching and non-teaching settings (Davis et al, in press). Tutors asked a greater number of questions than would occur in a natural setting, but far fewer than would happen in a typical teacher-centered classroom. Tutoring, then, exhibited some characteristics of both teaching and non-teaching settings.

Wallace (1988) discovered that student-teacher conferencing might take either approach: "It seems that the expectations and willingness of the student to take an active role in the writing

conference is at least as important as the teacher's willingness to allow the student to do so" (p.19).

The different settings might be characterized as negotiations for control. In non-teaching settings, there is little if any such negotiation; the participants seem to assume equal status. In traditional teaching settings, the teacher is clearly in control. In tutoring sessions, there appears to be a great deal of negotiation for control, tutors and writers sometimes working as equal conversants and sometimes as teacher/student. In conferencing, apparently, the teacher will take control if she needs to, if a passive student forces her to; an active student, however, will allow the conference to take on characteristics of natural conversation.

Peer groups, when seen in this control-negotiation schema, appear to come as close as possible to duplicating natural, non-teaching conversation. None of the members of this group assume control, putting less active members on the spot. There is no negotiating for leadership. Group members who choose to become silent observers are allowed to do so except for the brief time their paper is the center of focus. They are allowed to learn within the conversation, not by being forced to participate in it. They are allowed to assume the role, active or passive, that is most comfortable to them.

Conclusions

Obviously, the one group looked at here cannot be considered representative of all groups. But in the activities of this one peer group we can find many questions which might be examined in future studies of peer group conversation.

For example, an interesting correlation exists between these students' writing abilities, as reflected in their course grades, and their levels of participation in the group activities. Does such a correlation extend across other groups? Might this relationship be cause/effect? And if it is, which way does it work: is the more capable writer more likely to talk about writing, or is the more willing conversationalist more likely to become a capable writer?

Or is this discrepancy the result of socialization? The women, who were the better writers, made up 60% of the group, yet they accounted for 85% of the conversation. Is there something in the socialization process that makes women more likely to assume active roles during peer review?

Also, while all of these students were well accustomed to group work, they were not accustomed to working with each other. If I had recorded these same students in their regular groups, they might have assumed different roles and levels of activity.

Other questions exist in the comparison of peer group conversation with other types of conversation. Based on small samples, it would appear that peer group coversation more

accurately duplicates natural communication patterns than does the conversation in conferencing, tutoring, or traditional teacher-centered classrooms. But so what? Does that make it more comfortable for the participants? Does it make it more beneficial? Are peer groups more or less likely to produce changes in the writers and in their writing? Future studies might be able to answer these questions.

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